Interview with Heather Hill, afc2016037_04000
July 19, 2017
Interviewed at Renaissance Funeral Home, Raleigh, NC, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: Let me ask you to introduce yourself for the recording, and tell me where we are today.

Heather Hill: My name is Heather Hill, and I'm a funeral director at Renaissance Funeral Home in Raleigh, North Carolina.

SB: And how long have you been doing this sort of work, and how did you get started?

HH: I've been here at this funeral home for three years. I've been licensed almost exactly a year this month. So I've been licensed a year, but I did a two-year apprenticeship. I came here—I actually used to be a web designer, and then I did one of those career-builder websites one night, and typed in all my answers to the responses, and "funeral director" came up. And I slapped my head and said, "Oh yeah. This is awesome." And so I became a—I started school two weeks later. I'd had other careers in the past, but this is, I think, what that was building up to all these years.

SB: What sort of other careers had you been doing before?

HH: Ah. I started off as a bank teller, then I was a chiropractic assistant, then I was a vet tech, then I was an x-ray tech. And then I became a flight attendant, and that's where I met my husband. And then I went back to school to be a CT tech, realized that's not what I wanted to do. Then I did web design. (Laughs.) Little bit of everything.

SB: Little bit of everything.

HH: Yeah. Web design was the last thing before I went into this.

SB: So a lot of those, it sounds to me, are caring professions, and working with people and helping people.

HH: I guess that's what I'm drawn to, and that's why the web design thing didn't work, because I— Well, I had children at home, so I wanted to do something I could do at home. And I didn't continue with that because I wasn't getting a lot of personal—personal—personal time with people. And I wasn't doing things that I cared about. I realized I didn't like doing it anymore when I was doing websites for lawyers, or for things I didn't care about. When I was doing charity websites or some of my own

websites, then I really had a passion for it, so I'm glad I took that career test at 3 AM. There it was. Before I started school, I came to this funeral home to speak to a director, because I'd never been in the business before. Lot of people are raised in the business and this is their life, so I came and talked to Joe—Joe III, his father is also a funeral director. I said, "Give me the ins and outs. I'm about to start school, I don't know anything about this career." And he gave me the good and the bad. He said, you know, "You're going to be rewarded by helping people, but the hours are really crazy, and you see a lot of things that are hard. And so—didn't stop me. I continued to enroll in school, and then I came back. Kept in touch with him when it was time for an apprenticeship, and they had just finished up with another apprentice, and then I was able to step in. So I think it helped they were—I think they had in mind they were looking for a female. So I was at the right place at the right time, 'cause apprenticeships are hard to come by in this area. So I was really happy to stay on here. It's the only place I've been.

SB: I've heard that a lot more women are becoming part of this profession.

HH: Mm-hm. I'm not sure of the statistic, but it's a very high statistic of the people in school now are females. Yeah.

SB: And how did you come to Raleigh? You said you're from Ohio originally?

HH: Yeah, I'm from Ohio. I was a flight attendant, and I met my husband because we both worked for Corporate airline, and that was out of Cleveland. And then I was his flight attendant, he was my pilot, and we flew together all the time, and we fell in love. And then he had a condo in Florida, so it was either Ohio or Florida, Ohio or Florida; so we chose Florida. And then we got married, had children, and then we needed to sell the house. And my family was from Ohio, and I wasn't used to not having seasons down there, and I wanted to move halfway up. (Laughs.) And his mom lives in Durham, so it was a nice transition for us. So I wanted some seasons, but I didn't want the weather in Ohio. That's what brought me to Raleigh, just simply that.

SB: That's great. Was he from Durham originally?

HH: He moved to Durham when he was a senior in high school, with his mom, and then went off to flight school. And didn't spend much time there, but knew that he was gone all the time, and I had three kids, so—*we* had three kids (laughs)—I had three kids at home alone, so we wanted to be somewhere where I had a backup, just in case. That's what answered that call. And I like this area now. This is where we've planted our roots and we'll stay here now.

SB: And what was your schooling like in this field?

HH: All of my classes—I went through Fayetteville Tech, which, for those in the business know, in North Carolina, you can do either funeral director or embalming. And I started off doing just funeral director, then I moved to embalming, and then life situation—my husband passed away—and then I decided I needed to finish school and just get working.

[0:05:00] And so—but in a small funeral home, I'm able to at least assist. I don't need to stay up front and be just with the families, or stay in the back and be just with bodies. So I like being able to do a little bit of everything. And we do a little bit of everything here, so I can still do hair and help dress, and assist with embalming. But I can't do embalming on my own, because I'm just a—not *just* a funeral director—I'm licensed as a funeral director, not an embalmer.

SB: One thing that really interests me about funeral directors and embalmers and morticians is that I think it's natural that we're born with sort of a fright of dead bodies.

HH: Mm-hmm.

SB: How— Are people in your field not born with that? Or is it something that you have or get past because of your work?

HH: I can tell you my experience. When I worked as an x-ray tech I worked in the hospital. And I had watched some autopsies, and it was fascinating. It was really fascinating to me. In not a morbid way, but in an anatomical way. And to actually see how everything works. I mean, I'd seen them in pictures, I studied anatomy for years, so to actually see a picture, to see it in real life, was fascinating. I had to x-ray somebody who had died, and that was the first time I'd actually touched a dead body. And that was when I was in my twenties. So I wasn't scared then. And then when I started here, I didn't know whether or not I could do embalming, because I didn't know how it would be with actually really working with the bodies—with, you know, lifting arms and dressing and everything. And I watched a few, and I said, "I'm okay with this." I don't have a fear of bodies. Of the dead. Would I want to sleep alone in a funeral home with a lot of dead? Probably, maybe I do have a little fun. Like, I don't know if I'd want to sleep here alone. Maybe I would. I don't know yet. (Laughs) Maybe I will, maybe I'll try that. I'd love to know if there's something scary about it. I've never experienced anything to frighten me. So. I've met more people that frighten me than the dead. (Laughs)

SB: I'm so interested in the Death Café, and that phenomenon. Can you tell me a bit about that?

HH: Yes! The Death Café is— You first tell people, "Death Café," "What the heck is that?" It is a conversation. It's basically a conversation that brings up every aspect, or

whatever anybody wants to talk about, whether it's planning for your own death, preparing the documents that you need, or dealing with somebody that's dying. Grief. Ghosts. Afterlife. We talk about it all. We don't have an agenda. I've found—I started this, I think it's almost a year ago that we started doing this, and interest has grown a lot. And people leave so thankful, and saying, "This is a conversation we need to have. This is an important conversation." You hear this from people who have tried to speak to their own loved ones about planning for their own death, and people, our society, doesn't want to think about death or be cognizant of the fact that we're all going to die. And so we're afraid of it, we're afraid of the unknown, I think is what it is. But that's what we love about this, is that it brings these topics out, and it's okay to talk about. And somebody'll come, and they're like, "Finally! I feel like I can talk to people that are interested in this." It doesn't make you morbid. It doesn't make you goth. It doesn't make you odd. It makes you curious about your own death, and by being faced with death, you're able to live the best life that you can, because you know that you're going to die. And that's simple to say, "You know you're going to die," but people don't think about it. If you think about what kind of, you know, personal legacy you want to leave. So I think it brings up those topics, of people being able to think about how they want to be remembered, or taking care of loose ends, or things to give their loved ones to be able to plan and let them know what their needs are. And we talk a lot about grief as well. So—and how different it is for everybody else. So it's a great conversation. It's two hours, and sometimes I'm sure we all wish it was four. And we get a lot of great feedback about it. And I love the fact that we started—we started with about nine or ten, and we're up to about 25 now. And I think we might have to start dividing into groups now, because it's so popular.

SB: That's great. Did that originate here?

HH: No, Death Café is an international project started by actually a gentleman who just died.

[0:10:05] His name is John Underwood. In London, I think, it actually originated. It is, it's worldwide. You can get on the website and see all the different countries and different places that are doing this conversation that I think is really important to have. I don't think we talk about it enough, and I think it's conversations that we need to have, to make people less fearful.

SB: What are—this goes back to something that you were talking about earlier—can you talk more about the sort of, what draws people to the Death Café? Is there a typical member?

HH: Well, we have a lot of members that are end-of-life advocates, because they don't have anywhere else to talk to people that are of like mind. We have a lot of death doulas that come, a lot of hospice workers. By saying that, it's not all professionals. We have

people, we have a lady that is, she's an author, and she writes some sci-fi stuff, and she likes the morbid side of talking about death. We have some older folks that have some illnesses, or have been through a death, and were unhappy with the person not having the death that they wanted to have by planning their end-of-life decisions. And so they're trying to change that for themselves. And there's not enough people for them to talk about [it] with them. So it gives them a chance to come in and talk with like-minded people, where it's okay to say, "You know what? I don't want to be on a respirator. I don't want this, and how can I make sure that doesn't happen?" And also—I've made a lot of people come that I know (laughs), and they've told friends, and they told friends. There's some folks that we work with through the churches who work directly with families, and they're interested in the topic. I think somebody asked last time, "My mom doesn't want to talk about planning for herself. What are ways that I can bring this up to her?" And there was a lot of people who gave ideas. We have a lovely couple who come in, and they lost their daughter 17 years ago. So they have a great—they have great discussions about how they've, they deal with their grief. So it's just—I feel like I'm giving you different answers, but it's just a hodgepodge of what we talk about. And so it's a lot of caregivers, some of the public, a lot of the people that I've drug in (laughs), just people that find out by sharing it with somebody else that are interested.

SB: I saw on the web link that you sent—I thought it was interesting that there was a note that said that, "This is not a support group."

HH: Mm-hmm.

SB: But it sounds like it may indirectly have that benefit.

HH: Well, it does, indirectly, because grief is a part of death. And life. I think that also we put that there because people might not have heard of Death Café, and they may think that this is somewhere they can get help. There's no doctors there, there's no professional advice given. It's just talk. So I did that mostly for the public that wasn't interested—or wasn't knowledgeable of what a Death Café is. And we have had experiences where somebody has come in and lost someone, and the conversation is just about that. And as a moderator I try to— "Okay, we've been talking twenty minutes about grief, okay, so let's talk about something else." So I try to answer everybody's questions, when they want to talk about what happens to a body when they're decomposing, as opposed to how to deal with grief. So it's a lot of different topics at once.

SB: And what is that like for you moderating, what is that experience like?

HH: It's— I love it. I love it. There's only been a few times where it's gotten away, where I've had to kind of draw it back in, and that's when some of the grief stuff— And nobody's going to interrupt somebody talking about them losing somebody. And nor

do I want to. But I like the— And it's easy to do, because each conversation leads into something else that somebody else is interested in. So it's not like I throw out, "Oh, do you want a green burial or do you want to be embalmed?" And there's never crickets. It's like, "No, I want to do this." "No, I want to be cremated." So anything that I change to is always something that somebody is interested in talking about. And it's never my idea. I just—also, when we go around the room and intro everybody, I ask what they want to talk about, and if I remember that this lady wanted to talk about a burial, then I'll bring that up. Or remember Jessica wanted to talk about this. So it's interesting and fun, and I love how thankful people are when they leave that we're having this discussion. And that makes it even more important. And I love it.

SB: I think it's great. It's something I'm thinking I should come to myself.

HH: Mm-hm! Mm-hm.

SB: I would be really interested.

[0:15:00] Now, in terms of your work here, how do these skills carry over? I would think being a moderator you're a listener, as well as a guide.

HH: I think you have to—I think you really have to feel people, which sounds kind of, um, basic. But you really need to know when somebody needs to talk about something. I mean, of course, being a good listener. But you have to move things along. But if you're making arrangements, once the arrangements are done, then you sit and talk. And that conversation can lead to so many different things. Somebody will come back to pick up death certificates, and you just can tell—it's a widow, everybody's gone, left from the funeral. And that's a lot of times where we have a lot of the great conversations, when they come back in to pick up their death certificates. You know, there's an onslaught of people for the funeral, and then it's crickets. So I find that that's when I have the best conversations with a lot of the people that have lost somebody, is after the fact, after everybody has gone, because there's so much support during—I'm trying to remember the rest of the question you asked!—how that pulls over. So being a good listener is— And we have to pull on so many different talents too. You know, besides being, you know, being able to talk to somebody, you also—I have a strong graphics background, so I'll make prayer cards, and I'll take somebody's photo who's got, you know, four people in it from Grandpa's anniversary party, and be able to crop out his picture, and do really nice things with it, make it look like a portrait. So I think that's an important asset that I give to the families. Also making programs for them, and assisting with the obituary, and a lot of the slideshows. So I like to be able to give that gift, the graphic type of gifts, to them too, as well as the prayer cards. So I think that's a good talent to have. You have to be—I've found it's helpful to be really good with the computer, because all of our things are on the computer, I can help them navigate their way through things too and help them with links for attorneys and

following up with the estate. And then being able to be on your feet all day, and being able to do somebody's hair. So there's a lot of different—we wear many, many hats. We can be babysitter, we can help prepare food (laughs), we will prepare for the body, and take care of all of the clerical stuff as well. So there's—having a lot of different skills is really helpful, and I think that's been helpful for me, with the graphics and the web background that I have. And I enjoy doing that. When somebody gives me—and I think that's why I brought that up first—when somebody gives me a picture that, you know, it's a torn picture from a frame, that's moisturized, and I can—has a lot of moisture damage to it—and I can take that photo and make it look—I'm not a genius on Photoshop, but I can really help it. And that's all you have left when somebody dies. You know? And I didn't realize that. And it's really important, when you can fix that picture, to have them be able to cherish that memory. I like that part of it. If you can't tell. (Laughs)

SB: It's really interested me—I mean, I was telling you before we started recording about my friend Beacham, who partly inspired this whole project, and talking about his ancestors, and also other funeral directors I've met who um, have talked about earlier generations in this profession—it's really amazed me how many skills—and things that a lot of people would make an entire career out of, just one of the skills—you know, the clinical side, the legal side, the counseling aspects. And in your case, it really strikes me how many, with each passing generation, how many new skills are added. I mean, it doesn't sound like—maybe people are not carpenters anymore, building the coffins, but you are doing web design, and the graphic design.

HH: Mm-hm. Skills change with the times. And a lot of people want to do—you know, the ages of the people that are passing are hopefully eighties and nineties, and their fifty- and sixty-year-old children are more computer-savvy. So you know, it does change a lot. From what I've heard, and like I said I've only been in the industry three years, funeral directors and funeral homes are the slowest thing to keep up with trend.

[0:20:00] So I think that's slowly happening. We're finally getting to where we should be, trend-wise. You know, with computers and online obituaries and online arrangements. There should never been online arrangements, but there are some folks that are doing that, where everything is completely online; and that will never be a trend, nor will I ever think that's okay. You know. And that's where service comes in. That's why we offer a service.

SB: How do you—you're one of the youngest people in this profession I've interviewed—how do you as a younger member of this profession—

HH: Female.

SB: —and female, how do you see your role as being different from, say, the people who've come before you?

HH: See, I've only worked here, so I know that I'm very respected here. Our manager is younger than I am. I think in the industry, from the talk that I have—and more so with the public. I'll go to a church, and the pastor will come up and shake the associate's hand, and not realize that it's me. And it doesn't bother me, I'll just introduce myself. I don't know what people's first impressions are when they walk in and see that they're meeting with me. Because by the time they're done, I think they feel like they're being very well taken care of. Personally, in the three years that I've been only at one funeral home, I have not felt any competition with men or with older folks. The gentleman who I work with who's been doing this for over twenty years, he's been a very, very good teacher, and we work so well together because he's old-school—he's probably done three, four thousand embalmings—he knows the ropes. And then I come in, and I know the computer. And we excel in our own way, so we're like yin and yang together. We're like one person and we work really well together, so I think if you have a combination of that old-school integrity—not that we don't have integrity—but the old-school tradition, and then a fresh mind works really well together, I think. Because I came in with no funeral home experience, and I think we've made a good mixture of who we are as one. "Who we are as one"—sounds like a t-shirt. But I don't feel— I think in general— I'll tell you, when I was looking to find somewhere to work, I was going to the about-me pages and looking for a funeral home that had younger-looking folks. I know that sounds bad! I pictured a stuffy old man in a suit and, like, "Oh, god, I'm not going to feel comfortable there," being myself, you know? Because I'm not a somber, [uses Alfred Hitchcock voice] "*Good evening*" type of person. I was looking for someone that I thought I could get along with, and I'd be able to work with day-to-day in an industry where you still have to smile, you still have to enjoy who you're working with and try to make the best of it. And that's what I've found here. That's why I love it here.

SB: And I think it's so cool that I came in and your kids are here.

HH: Yeah. [Laughs] We put them to work. Well, after my husband passed away, my best friend moved in with me. She takes care of the kids, and I go to work full-time. She helps us set up, and school's out, so— And they love being in the chapel, because there's such a great acoustics in there. And they go in there and sing, and they play scary music, and make it echo. And they're intrigued by that. Yeah, and they're welcome here—you know, to a point. They would like to write on our whiteboard. When I interviewed, that first time when I came in to talk to Joe, my daughter was in the car, and she actually cried when I was in here. Like, "I don't want you working there, Mommy." And now it's like, [sighs] rolls her eyes at it. It's no big deal. And some of her friends think it's cool. They either think it's cool or gross that their mom's a funeral director. I think that's kind of neat.

SB: I was actually going to ask exactly that, what do your kids friends think about it?

HH: Mm-hmm. And what's really, I hope for this year, is they have truck fairs and career days. They call it a truck fair—and we didn't do this when I was in school, I didn't know what it was—where we will take the hearse to middle schools, and the sixth graders come around to each station, and they ask about our careers. And I couldn't wait, because my daughter's in sixth grade this year, and I couldn't wait to go to her school so I could embarrass her a little bit, and she could say, "That's my mom." You know. And they canceled the one at her school this year. So I'm like, if she does it next year at her school, hopefully she can pop in and see me. I was really looking forward to that point, but. Yeah. I don't want her to get made fun of or anything.

[0:25:00] If she tells people, she must be proud of it. "Maybe someday you can do this." "No, Mom." [Laughs] We'll see.

SB: May I ask you a bit about your husband's passing, and how that's affected your career?

HH: I don't mind talking about that at all. No, what a lot of people think is that I went into this after he passed, because I was so moved by the experience. And that's not what happened. I was actually in school—I'm really bad with dates, but I think I was in school for almost two years, I think I started in 2012 or '13. So I had been in school, and I had just secured an apprenticeship here. I think I started in October. So I had some book-work behind me. And then I started here, and two months later he passed away. So I had already been established and knew a little bit. He was a pilot for JetBlue, and he was on a layover in San Diego, and didn't show up for his trip. And he had ruptured his aorta and passed away in his sleep. So I got a call on Saturday morning, "the call," as I call it, the day. And I'm thankful that I had this—you know, I had the psychology classes about telling the kids the truth, not to hide it, not to say "Daddy's sleeping and not waking up." You know, I'm glad I had the support for my background for this, and the folks here, hands-down, took excellent care of me. And because he was in California, my owner knew somebody who knew somebody out there that would take good care of him and then bring him back, and then everything was here. And so I think, aside from my personal dealing with that grief and with the children, I came back to work almost two weeks later—which seems quick, but I needed to get, I needed a purpose, I needed to get out of the house. Just today somebody viewed somebody who died in that same room that I walked through to view my husband. So as they're walking in the room, I can't say I know what they're feeling, but I understand where they were when they walked—I said, "I've walked that same path." Before, I remember—a friend of mine, one of my daughter's teachers, grew up in a funeral home, and before I started here, I said, "What do I say to people when I walk in? 'Hello, Mrs. Smith, I'm sorry for your loss?' Like, what do you say?" I was a little awkward on how

to— It was almost like it was a different language that you speak to people that are grieving. But after my husband died I didn't have to think about it. It just happened. You know when there's people that are more formal, and there's people that will tell you their life story, and there's people that just need you to sit with them, maybe quiet. And I think that honed that skill for me more. I didn't have to think about it. It just was there. And I think that helped me deal with people. And it's like, I'm healing myself by being here. These are my people. "My people!" I don't know why I said that in a New York accent. "You know, I know a guy…" These are my people, literally. I don't know what they're going through but I know the steps that they take. Today when I met with that family, the lady asked me, "How do you do this?" She's like, "How do you do this now?" And I said, "I know where I am now. In no way are you ever going to heal from grief, but I know that I've been over that hump, and I'm sitting here with you guys and you're crying, and I know you're upset, but I know you're going to be okay. And that hope, that you're going to be okay, helps me to not break down with you." And so I don't know if that's resonating, but that really is truthful, because I'll look at them, and it's really hard, but I know they're going to be okay. And I know that maybe—as we talk about in the Death Café—maybe they'll see something positive from that death. You know, somebody that lost a parent, maybe they'll bond with that other parent. The lady that I work with who lost her daughter, she's now helping people. So while a death is tragic and—well, not always tragic—while a young death can be tragic, you can make something positive out of it. And that's not wrong to say. And while I would rather have my husband back. I think I'm able to hold their hand a little differently, I think. And I'm not ashamed or sad that I'm doing that. You know what I mean? I'm proud that I'm able to take something from that, and help people. You know? I've had widows that—their dads have passed, and they're like, "Do I let my kids see? Do I let them view? How do I talk—"And I can say, "I went through it. Here's how it was for me. Nobody's the same, but here was my thought on it." And then also when it comes to filing the estate and legal parts, "Here's what I went through, and here's who you can contact."

[0:30:04] The register of deeds, that was really helpful to me. "And make sure you gather this item." Well, that's all facts, to actually go through it. You can say, "They told you do that, but you don't need to now." So I think everything that I can take good from that, I'm going to. And that's been helpful. I sound really positive about it—it's not always that great. That's how I've chosen to deal with it, is by— And it's an honor to be with somebody when they're going through the worst day of their life. It literally is, it's a vulnerable honor to be with somebody, and I take that very seriously.
And it is— I went and checked on them while they were viewing, and I was like, "Are you okay? Do you need anything?" And just sat and talked. That's as vulnerable and as honorable a thing you could do. I'm really thankful to be able to do that.

SB: It must mean a lot to them too, to be able to connect to somebody who understands.

HH: I've heard that, I've heard people say—especially, not just people who are in my position, but somebody with kids, like, "Wow, I'm glad that we came here, because you have gone through it. You really have another angle to be able to help us." And you know, I get a lot of people that say, "That's very helpful." And that reiterates why I'm doing this. It makes it all worthwhile. And some people say, "Oh you're just saying it, it's helpful. Thank you for helping me, I appreciate your words," but it really does. I mean, that's why we do this, is to get that reaction. That's what we strive for. Not just for the reaction, but for you to feel that way, that we really help. It's a true feeling.

SB: Can I ask what your husband's first name was?

HH: Jon.

SB: Jon. And how old was he when he passed?

HH: Jon. Forty-three. Jonathan—he went by Jon. Yeah. We were married 10 years. And I got three—12, 9, and 10. Well, they're 12, 9, and 10 now, and he died December of '14, so it'll be three years this December.

SB: I'm so sorry.

HH: Thank you.

SB: Your kids are beautiful.

HH: Thank you.

SB: I was really glad to meet them.

HH: Two of them are literally spitting images of him. Like, I can't—especially—well, the boys are built like him, so the bigger they get the more I can see my husband. And it's really— Yeah, I have to sit back sometimes, because they look so much alike. I gasp a little bit, like— I know when they get older they're going to look even more like him. So. And I look back, and I think of that, and I think, wow, they're literally a part of him. Well. But then that's hard too, because they're missing out. I saw band night, parent band night, and dads escorting the daughters. And then my neighbors all look at me because they know I'm going to be tearing up, knowing that she's not going to have her dad to walk her on Senior Night. So I mourn for them a lot. You know. But they're doing okay, you know? For now. You know. We talk about him, and they're processing, and hopefully it will affect their lives in a positive way. Maybe they'll be hands-on dads, like he was. You know. That's how I choose to see it right now. That's what gets me through. (Laughs) You got to do what works for you.

SB: Thank you for sharing about your family.

HH: Sure. I'm fine to share. I love to share about it, and my little ornery kids. (Laughs)

SB: Where does— You've talked a little bit about the interpersonal relations with the people you work with. What does—can you sort of walk me through that relationship, from, you know, receiving the call to—?

HH: Yeah. I'm trying to give examples of what has happened. Usually I'll meet somebody at the door. You know, when you first start out with meeting with somebody, I've found what works with me is you need to build their trust. They're not going to instantly pour out everything, or know that you're a good person and not out to take them for all your money. And so I usually start with the vitals first, because that's the easiest answers, usually. And then the vital talk usually brings up things. "Well, he was a waiter." "Oh really? Where did he work?" So you kind of build up your conversation then. And then after the vitals are done and you've already got a little bit of a rapport, then you start talking about service and what you can do for them. Like, "Well, let's personalize this. What do you think of this? And we can do slideshows. What do you think of this? And show me your favorite picture of him." And then things start to open up. Maybe I'll share with them; I don't tell everybody, "By the way, I'm Heather, and I'm a widow, and I'm going to be able to help you."

[0:35:00] Sometimes I share it and sometimes I don't. And sometimes it just comes up in conversation. "Well, I know that I need 25 death certificates." I'm like, "No, you don't. I've been through this." And they're like, "You have?" "Yeah, actually, I only needed this many, and I know every situation's—" Because there's an old-school thought that you need like 25 death certificates. You don't really need that many. So that's where it comes up, that I may have a little bit, know what you need. And then it goes to—usually then it moves on to the type of service, and that I can make this picture, and I can make this picture pretty. And that you don't need to choose an urn right now, let's decide that later, because you guys have a lot going on right now, and let's just get the service done." And they appreciate—they're making a lot of tough decisions, and I know that when things are in print, it's harder to see. I know when I first saw my husband's obituary in print. So I don't know if many people realize that, but certain things that triggered me I think might trigger somebody else. So when it's time to do the things that are in print, I'll even say, "This is hard, I know." To sign the cremation authorization—we do a lot of cremations here—so, "I know it's hard for you to sign the cremation authorization. You know, that's— Do you want me to go over that with you, or do you want me to just summarize each paragraph? I can give you a copy." So I think they appreciate me stepping into those things easy. And I know that it's hard to see the casket room. So when we go see the casket room, "This is kind of— When you're ready—" It's hard to see caskets when you know that your son or your mother

or your father is going to be in there. So I think they appreciate that. And then I think a lot—and then I'll show them around, and it always seems to me there's a time— Sadly, funeral directors have a bad rep, a lot of them. You know, because of all the—Jessica Mitford book[1], and a lot of the—which is still relevant, that it being just a business, that we're here to make money. And I think a lot of people come in already challenging you on things. Then I almost can feel every point when they realize that that's not why I'm here, what we here at Renaissance do. You know, we're—nobody has a lot of money—well, some people maybe want to spend a lot of money on a funeral (laughs), but I'm like, "You know what, you can get this, but this one has this feature, and it's not as much as that, and it comes from a different company. So let's not do that." And, "I'll print you some obituaries. We don't charge to print that, I just want you to have those." Like, once they know that you're not trying to get them—(laughs) sadly thanks to past funeral directors—or that you really are there, there's an actually, you feel it, in the conference, when you actually gain their trust. And then once you gain their trust, then it's two ways the whole way. That happened today. I met with a family this morning and I actually felt that turn. She was kind of snippy in some of her responses to me—"Well, that's not what we want to talk about right now"—and then it turned. And then I think, once you've gained that trust, then anything that you do, they're so grateful for. And I don't know how many times people say, "You know what, this turned out great. It's a funeral, but everything went the way it was supposed to go, and thank you for this suggestion." So I think, for me, that's how it progresses. And I never show anybody the facility when they first walk in. They're not ready to talk about service stuff yet. We need to get in, we need to get to know each, how—you know, there's a lot of different relationships. There's the mom and the step-mom together, and the sister who doesn't talk to the other sister. You know what I mean? You feel that out, respect it, and you find what works. So I think once you come back and go over all those things and get that feel, then it grows from there. And I like, I've actually had, picked up somebody at the hospital, in the hospital room, met with them, went through the service, and took them to Arlington myself, and walked with the family behind the casket. So literally from death to burial. That's what I love best about what we do here. I'm not sure how it is at other funeral homes. I think whoever's working does the service. I want to be with them from the second they arrive, whether they pick up the body or not, to the very end. And they like to see that same—they trust me, and they look to me, and they know that I've been that stable for them the whole time. And I think that's what gains trust, too. And sharing, when I do share with them, then people do, they realize they're talking to somebody that's been through it. And I don't throw it out with everybody, but there's times that I know it will be helpful to them to know that I've been through it too. So I think that's kind of how it works for me. I don't know how it works for everybody else.

---

[1] *The American Way of Death*, first published in 1963.

[0:40:00] SB: I'm glad you brought up the Jessica Mitford book. I already knew several funeral directors before I read that, so you know, I had the perspective that, you know—this is not the whole picture, it's if anything a very small part of the picture. I knew that all the funeral directors I'd met were very compassionate people who worked in it for—

HH: For the right reasons.

SB: —yeah, who were in it for the right reasons. Exactly. But how has that affected the field, and public perceptions of the field?

HH: That's a good question. I feel like I'm in such a small population, where we are, and that our funeral home doesn't operate like that. And I'm only going to bring this up because I think it's relevant. I just had a gentleman email me yesterday, and he was getting cremation rates. And our cremation rates are in the low, in the mid-twos. And he said, "Well, I found some for $980 in Richmond. What's the difference?" I'm like "Fair question." I said, "Well, there are some that are lower-price ones, and there is a need for that. There are some families that are not going to have a service, and that's all they can afford. And nobody's going to judge that." And then so I answered him that there are $950 providers, and there's $4,000 providers, that you're going to buy a package. Mostly corporate-owned funeral homes. And I'm biased that you're going to buy a package and you're going to get a hundred thank-you notes that you don't need, and you're going to get this engraved necklace that— I don't know what they provide, because I don't work there. But I said, "We provide a level of service a step up from there." I know a gentleman that does it here, works out of his car. Doesn't always wear a nice suit when he comes to pick up your mother. You know? And I wouldn't want that level of care. So I said, "We're a step up from that care. And we file the death certificate, which means going to the doctor's office, sometimes going back twice, and then taking it downtown. And then we notify Social Security, we help you place an obituary, we will help you with estate settlement." So I gave him all the services we provide, and then I said, "Actually, the cremation is the cremation. We're probably all using the same one. But it's a level of service that we provide." And so—and I'm going somewhere with it—and I said, "Is that the level of care that you want?" And the 900, you're going to get that car with somebody that's not very professional, you don't know how they're handling the body. So he wrote back, and I thought—I almost did it with my fur up, "Well, think about—you get what you pay for," to a point. You know what I mean. He wrote back, and he was like, "Thankful for your thoughtful email," discussing why, and, "I will be calling you when my dad passes." I didn't expect to get that. I was like, "Okay, I spent twenty minutes thinking out that email, and it came back." Because there is— I remember before I got into the funeral service a *20-20* episode about people up-selling, and all these things that seal up that you don't need to seal up. And I had my back up when my mom was planning for my grandmother. I was like, "Don't let them sell you this, don't let them sell you that." And I think that's a hard

rap to beat. And I think slowly people—and I remember that, and I'm mid-forties, and I think a lot of people that are planning for funerals are my age or usually older. And I think that there are still people out there like that. I belong to a Facebook group that's all about business. And somebody said, "Would you charge somebody to come in and fill a necklace with cremains?" "Oh, yeah, absolutely. We're putting our time in." And then most of the people said "Absolutely not." But it's because there are still people like that out there that it's about— And I think the corporate funeral homes don't help at all by charging the prices that they do charge, I think, and including it in a package of things they don't need. We do charge what we charge, but we have to pay the bills. We have staff. Nobody's driving expensive Lamborghinis in the back, you'll see that. So I think it's fair, and I'm happy that I work somewhere that I feel is fair. And you do get great service. And it'll be beautiful, and we have a beautiful chapel and a beautiful facility. And that's something that you pay for as well. And we also offer our families the use of our facility for no charge when we do a cremation, because we feel it's so important to have that rite of passage. You know, and I like to talk people into doing that. But in general, how that book— Hopefully we're on our way back up. But I think while we're still—I don't know, people aren't really educated. I think the average estimate is that 2.5 people will plan a funeral in their lifetime. They'll plan 2.5 funerals in their lifetime!

[0:45:00] Which is, you know, normal people that aren't interested in this don't go around investigating this type of stuff until you need it. You know? So it's not like—I mean, you're talking about funerals, so you're interested in it. There's not many people that do that. So I think until, as public knowledge, as that you have more choices, you don't have to do the standard funeral that we all grew up with. I actually had someone come in and said, "I thought by law you had to embalm." And I said, "Absolutely not. You don't have to do embalming." So hopefully that shift is changing. And I'm trying to do my part in that by having these Death Cafés. And you don't know what ripple effect that might have, if somebody else actually saying to somebody, "Well, I was at a Death Cafe, and Heather said you don't have to embalm," or "Heather said you don't have to do this." And hopefully my little ripple will cause something in the general vicinity. (Laughs) I like to think so anyway. (Laughs) We'll see.

SB: Thinking about planning funerals, what is it like to work with a person who's coming in with pre-arrangements? Both, you know, just—

HH: Like if they've prearranged with us and have everything done? Or if they bring in their own paperwork and say, "This is what we want." It's the same thing.

SB: Oh, I mean if—I may not know the right term for it—but when a person comes in and wants to pre-arrange for their own funeral arrangement.

HH: Mm-hmm. We do that a lot. Usually it's because they had a death recently in their family that wasn't planned, and, or they went through somebody that did have it planned, or they've been to, close friends with somebody. Recently I had a family who, nothing was planned, not even the gravesite or the burial place, not even a cemetery. And I remember all of her friends around her, she had a lot of support, they're like, side-whispering to me, "You know what, Heather? This is like—realizing we all need to go do this." I don't think until you, unless you're really anti— You know the people, they're like, "Absolutely not, don't bring it up, I don't want to talk about it." But it's not for you, it's for your survivors. And I find a very—and I'm for it, I'm all for pre-planning. Even if you don't pre-pay, give me a booklet of exactly what you want. You want a cremation? You want to do a church service at the church? And you want your remains to go here, and you know what song you like? Just so somebody knows what your wishes are. Although then again, we run into people who say, "Dad wanted nothing. He just"—my dad's like this, he says, "Throw me in a pine box out in the woods" is what he says. Which I like to do, because I like green burial. But they're like, "Well, Dad said he didn't want anything, and we want to honor his wishes." And I've turned a couple people, I'm like, "Well, your dad loves you, and we don't charge—" So it's not like I'm trying to talk them into something we charge for. You can use our facility for free, but—but with a lot of the direct cremations that we're doing now, people just want to do direct cremation and wash their hands and be done. Whereas there's a community rite, r-i-t-e, a community rite for people to gather and remember that person and give their condolences to the family. And I think it's an important part of the grieving process that people have that service. So I've talked several people into saying, "He wanted that because he didn't want you to have extra costs, or maybe he didn't like going to funerals, but this is for you. This is not about him right now. This is about you and your mom, who are left, and you guys can be lifted." Because the community that surrounds somebody lifts them up so much. When it happened to me, there was so much love and support around me. I found it hard to cry a lot because there was so much love, and people were doing so much. You know when I'd cry, when somebody would do something nice for me. Like "She bought me this dinner and I'm so happy." So it's so important to have something. Don't have it here. If your dad liked to drink, go down to the bar and have a shot in his name. You know, or go to the bowling alley. And you know, do something. Whether that's, if that's pre-planned and he tells everybody, then good. And the prepayment makes it so much easier on the family too. Although cremations aren't that expensive. You could dole out $3,000, $3,500 for a cremation, as opposed to nine to $10,000 for a funeral. Not that everybody has that. You know what I mean? It's a little easier. I've done a lot of pre-payment lately, and pre-planning, and it's for your loved ones. And I'm a big proponent of pre-arranging. Literally you pick a day and time. Everything's already done. And people say, "This is so easy, I'm so glad she did this, and we don't have to make any decisions." When you pre-pay you can also pre-sign your cremation authorization, which means you don't have to have all the family get signatures before you can even do the cremation. You can sign your own. And everything is done. It's so easy. I really

think it's a great idea. And I've read places where they say it's a scam, where you can use your life insurance money. But God forbid you go into long-term care.

[0:50:00] Then that money that you're putting for a pre-arrangement is protected, it's a protected asset. So when people hear that, they're like, "Okay, no matter where you go, your initial investment is always there. We don't keep the money. We invest it with third party." So I'm all for it, and the families like it when people do it. Happy families, happy me. (Laugh) That helps.

SB: My father did that. He had arranged and paid for everything, and we didn't know about it. And thank goodness he did, because when he died it was such a shock, we couldn't have, you know—there was various messy legalities, we didn't have the cash on hand to take care of it if he hadn't done it. So you know, it was a good thing.

HH: It's a gift. It really is.

SB: Yeah. Absolutely. Now, this is a fairly—the Raleigh area anyway, this is a fairly ethnically and religiously diverse area. Is that the case of the clientele here?

HH: Yes. That's what I love about this. Like I said, we're family-owned, and Joe is younger than me, and his dad, Joe, has a funeral home in New Hyde Park. And from what I hear, they're all Italian or Polish Catholic. It's the same service they do every day, different person. I love that we don't do that. It would be a little easier, because you'd have everything already set up. I had a Jewish funeral yesterday. We've done non-denominational funerals. I've got a Christian funeral coming up. The family that owns this is Catholic, so we do a lot of—I'm an honorary Catholic, by the way. I'm of no religion, but I'm an honorary Catholic, and I love the music. But I love the idea. We've done Indian Hindu funerals, and creative things, and I love the diversity in this area, and I love the different traditions. It was my first Jewish funeral yesterday, so that was really interesting to be a part of that. It was so hot though! (Laughs) Outside at the cemetery. But I love that part of it. You brought that up, and it's so true. You never know what we'll have. It's really neat.

SB: Is there a lot of sort of quick learning about traditions, or do you come into this with a—

HH: Well, the hardest ones to learn are the Catholic— They have their special rules. And Hindus have their rules. You know, the burial has to take place in this amount of time, and there's anointing to be done. And the same with the Jewish folks. They need to have this done at this time, and this is the kind of casket. The chevra kadisha will come and wash the body. I've not done a Muslim funeral yet. But I have a friend who's Muslim, and he might plan with me. (Laughs) But um, I think, those ones, yes. We do know those strict rules. And we have Jewish folder up there and we read, "Okay, this is

what we need." Because we don't do them every day. But the other ones are usually non-denominational, and then it's the sky's the limit. You can do what you want. And a lot of our green burials end up like that, where they'll do—somebody had a sprite and a juice mix, and it was called the Elixir of Life. And they passed around cups to us and we drank it, and then we sprinkled some on the grave. And then they lit candles and we sang. I love the freedom of that, but I also respect the Catholic way, because you know what to— Mass is what comforts people, because you know what's going to happen. They know that they're going to get their Eucharist, and so there's something calming about having that. I love it all. I never know what's going to walk in the door.

SB: So anthropology is another field that's—

HH: Yeah, it really is. And also we have these different sects. Those people that did the Jewish funeral, they weren't strict followers. So there's a little bit of leeway there. You know, and then you have some Catholic folks. Most devout Catholics don't cremate, but we do a lot of Catholic cremations, because it's okay now. The Pope has approved it. So while we get those religions, we get variations of those religions too, where I think in that funeral home like in New York, you do this, this is the morning-of, there's no variation. So we have variations even on our strict religions. (Laughs) Very lenient down here in the South.

SB: What is the approximate break-out of, you know, the work that you do here between embalming, non-embalming, earth burial, green burial, cremation?

HH: I think I just looked at these numbers the other day, and don't hold me to this.

[0:55:00] I think we're about, this year, and I think we're a little lower this year, we're only halfway through, we're 75 to 80% cremation. And of our burials, I'd say a little more than half of those—say 20% of our burials, I'd say 10% are embalmings, or 15, and then I think the other 5% is green burial. Which is kind of my thing. I really like green burial. As you know it differs from year to year. But our cremation rate is very high. Especially in Raleigh. You go outside of Raleigh—which, you've probably talked to some folks outside of Raleigh—and that may flip. It's really different. There's so many—with the Triangle here, with Research Triangle Park, we have a lot of people that aren't from here. So I think that makes it higher. And I did some research—let's see—I think a lot folks that are more educated folks, I think, do cremation and green burial than traditional burial. I read a number there, don't quote me on that though. That's where we are in it. Which is neat too. Even though we do direct cremations, most of them have services. So we're still doing, servicing the family, not just doing a direct cremation.

SB: What are the options for green burial? What's currently available?

HH: Green burial is the quick—no embalming, no vault. And there's two cemeteries in Raleigh that do green burial. Oakwood Cemetery, downtown, has a section called Mordecai Meadows, where they do green burial; and then Pine Forest in Wake Forest. They have a beautiful cemetery, and then a pond, and then behind the pond is just woods—and you're literally in the woods. Folks can choose from a cardboard container, a pine box that is made locally here in North Carolina, or a shroud. So they choose which cemetery, then they choose which casket or shroud, and then we don't usually—with those we don't usually do viewings, because the body's not embalmed. Although it could be viewed without being embalmed. But usually it's, you want to do a viewing right away. So usually just the family, if they need to have their closure and see the body that's done right away. Then the folks will either do a service here or will do a graveside service. And whether or not they're— A lot of times at Oakwood what we've done so far is they have a lowering device that will lower the body down. At Pine Forest we have ropes. We actually, the family will lower down and sometimes even cover up the grave themselves. And I love the green burials. I think it's beautiful. We did a green burial on someone's property, and I just remember the grandkids covering up the grave, and saying, "Bye, Grandpa." And I thought, how healthy is that. Where we get phone calls all the time, "Is there going to be a body present? I don't want to bring my children if there's going to be a body." So I love the idea that it's more hands-on, it's more interactive, and it's—I think—it's healthier. That's my opinion. I'm not sticking behind. (Laughs) We all grieve better when we're more hands-on, I think.

SB: I think so too. Do you encounter much by way of people's supernatural beliefs in your work?

HH: People— I'll hear people talking about some strange occurrences that have happened around the home. And I love hearing that. I wish that I would have—hopefully your next question is have I ever noticed anything here—maybe it wasn't—but no, I haven't. I really wish I would, because I personally don't know what's on the other side. And I figured if I saw something here that would change my mind, then I would feel better. But I never have noticed anything odd here. And I love to hear what people say. Most of it is at the time of death. Like, "She was waiting until somebody came," or "The second we stepped out, this happened," or "Right afterwards, my phone died," or— You know, I love hearing—nothing, no major stories, "I was visited and she said 'Go to Renaissance.'" (Laughs) I wish they would. But I like, I hear a lot of the same ones. I remember, I was taking an urn to the church one time, and I was driving my own car, and I sat the urn down beside me in my seat, and a ladybug came and landed on the lid. I said, "Well, hello. You're coming with me." And then I got there and I told the family. I thought it might be nice. And they're like (gasps), "You're kidding! That was her favorite. That was her visiting." So I love that story. And I'm open to it, and I love hearing about it. I just wish I would experience it.

[1:00:00] Maybe someday. I guess you have to be open to it. But I don't know. I wish I knew.

SB: And is that something that the folks at the Death Café have talked about some too?

HH: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Not so much. Hopefully I'll bring that up a little bit next time. I can't exactly right now remember, but I have had, remember some topics coming up. I think at our very first one—and she's never came back—her husband was actually an investigator, paranormal investigator, and she had said they never found much. But I think that also comes into having faith. You know. There are redbirds around, and if you see a redbird land in your yard and you think that's a sign from your husband, then please, it is a sign. That's your faith. I love that, and I love hearing those stories, and I hope it is. I hope that we figure out the greatest— That's what my husband told me when I started working here. I'm like, "What happens, and why do people think this?" And he's like, "Whatever happens when we die is the greatest mystery, and we're not supposed to know until it happens." Well, maybe someday we'll all know. Maybe we'll all be back together again someday. If I only had proof. A notarized statement would be nice. (Laughs) I wish.

SB: What do you see in the coming years for your work?

HH: Personally, or as funeral work? I would love to have my own funeral home, with a crematory, and do green burial, and actually have my own green cemetery. That's what I would love to do. And then have a therapy dog there, so that people can grieve. That would be my dream. And before I, before my husband died, he was like searching for crematories, and open up your own thing—because everybody asks you that, "Do you want to open your own?" After he passed I was like, dream is gone, because I have to support my family. I can't dream like that. But there are some people that are doing that and doing a good job at it. Our green burial rate is so low right now I'm not sure it would sustain something. That's why I would want to have a crematory as well. But if I had, if you handed me like six million dollars right now—I don't know why I said six—that's what I would do. I would buy a big plot of land, open a green cemetery, my own funeral home, and get a therapy dog. Don't even need to think about that.

SB: I love the idea of having a therapy dog.

HH: Mm-hmm. And they're out there, and they're happening. And I'm trying to get one here. I have two at home, but they would not do well. My labradoodle is afraid of people, and my little one, a Maltese-Yorkie mix, he would just lick you the whole time. But I'd love to get— Because people love animals, and that would make the experience even that much better, I think. But I'm not good at training dogs, so I'd have to have help with that.

SB: (Laughs) Well, there are so many topics we've covered, but so many more we could. What have we not touched on that you would like to be sure and include in this recording?

HH: Um, I think I would touch just more on the move to green burial and why.

SB: Yeah. Yeah.

HH: I think we get stuck in customs. You know. Even growing up, my grandparents passed when I was in my twenties and early thirties, and you did embalming, and you did a casket that sealed, and a vault that sealed. It's just what you did. And then my other grandfather passed away right after I started here, and he was cremated. And it was the first cremation in our whole family. I like seeing that move to different things. I don't personally like the idea of somebody in a casket, in a sealed box under the ground like that. I've seen a disinterment lately, and after seeing that, I'm even more convinced. I think our bodies are organic materials and we need to return to the earth. Whether that's through cremation or through green burial, personally, that's what I think. I don't understand why we ever went to that in the first place. Nobody— I don't know if people think— And I don't talk people out of it, but I wonder what people think your body is going to be protected forever? And the process that happens to a body when it decomposes, and it's not, have air and water, is not—people don't know what happens. It's a secret. Like, google what happens to a body in a sealed—I'm trying not to—the public may be listening to this—but do your research on what, how bodies decompose. That's not how you want to decompose.

[1:05:00] That's why I think cremation is so popular. But there's such a slow move from what we think a traditional funeral should be. And the more I've done this, the more convinced that I am that I want to just return, I want to return my body to the earth. There's a Fox Chase, Fox-something Reserve in Ohio. I forget the name. It's in Wilmot. It's a conservation ground. So by planting yourself there (laughs) you're not only returning to the earth and helping things grow, you're also conserving that land. Nothing else will be— They won't pave Paradise and put up a parking lot. You know? So I love that idea. What's hard to see is people come in and say, "She was a gardener, she loved this, and she bought organic food." But then you're going to buy expensive chemicals and a casket and just—you know, and I don't like the fact that funeral directors aren't educating people about the different choices, and that they're going to make more money by doing that. On this Facebook site that I'm a member of, just to, I don't know, turn a side-eye, "Well, we can't do cremation because that's killing our business." Well, you've got to adapt. And I think, I don't think green burial will ever be *the* choice, but I think it will be alongside cremation. I don't like the— And I hope that that trend continues, and I hope that we can educate people on the other choices that they have. But it's really hard to educated people. As I'm sitting here with you, I'm

wondering, maybe you just buried somebody and you chose a vault and a casket, now you're wondering, "Ew, what choice did I make?" Like, mausoleums, why—putting somebody in a— So we're educated about everything else, but we don't research what happens to our bodies. If you're very concerned about the body that you're going to spend $4,000 on a casket, and $1,400 on a vault, but not research why or why not you want—

SB: What in ten years from now the body's going to be like.

HH: Yeah. In less than a year you could decompose naturally, or in thirty to forty, fifty years. And I don't know why people—I don't understand, besides tradition and culture, why that would be. But. I don't know.

SB: When you talk to people about green burial, do you find that they already know about it, or are they surprised?

HH: Hmm. That's what we come up against. It's not— They may have heard the word, but they don't understand what it means, or that it's legal, or that you can do it here. When I walk away from a green burial people will say, "I didn't know you could do that," or, "Can I do this in my yard?" That people know that they can do some stuff at home. First thing you think of, "A funeral at my house? I don't want a body—" Then we have to say, why do we have that death-negativity? That's what we did beforehand. It's kind of like, death and birth, before it was professionalized and medicalized, it was done at home. So I would love to be able to help people do home funerals, and then assist them with burial. They may have heard about it and they don't know about it, and they may be leaning that way, but they're afraid what their friends might think. They're afraid that it's not, you know, respectful enough. And that's kind of tough. The family before last, there was the wife and two, I think it was her nieces. And the nieces like hounded me with questions. "Ooh, where can you do this? This is allowed? We love this idea." And the wife said, "No, this is tradition. This is how—" And never, ever would I question or judge. I mean, I have my opinions, but I can 100% respect what somebody does. And she thought about it and thought about it, and I thought, "Oh, I'm going to sway it." But then we ended up doing a sealed vault and an embalming, and that's what comforted her. And that's fine. But for me or my loved one, that's not what I would choose. But they were intrigued. So it's a little— Although I did do a green burial last month of a 90-year-old. She chose her green burial. But I think it's going to take a long time, but we're dropping these little clues everywhere. And hopefully somebody will remember, "Oh, no, you can do this. "And hopefully more cemeteries will offer it. You know, when I get my six million and I open up my cemetery in North Raleigh, then everybody will know about it. (Comical laugh) I wish! I'll play the lottery.

SB: I do too.

HH: "Got to play to win."

SB: I think you mentioned this earlier, but do you think this is—some people who creation would have chosen green burial if they'd known about it? Is cremation like the, sort of, understood alternative to—

[1:10:00] HH: I think so. I think it is socially acceptable, more socially acceptable sometimes than green burial. And I don't know. I think cost does play a factor, because direct green burial is more than cremation. So if it comes down to cost, I think that's important. And I think the people that are choosing cremation, it's because that's what the deceased wanted. Maybe the deceased didn't know there was a green burial. So I think those factors play into why they do it. Most of the people that I sway into green burial—not sway or discuss or bring up—is not usually cremation to green burial, it's traditional burial to burial. So it's almost like there are two different things in people's minds, and they don't usually go from cremation to green. They usually go traditional to green. That's what I've found.

SB: That's fascinating. I would have guessed it was the other way. That's interesting. Now, I was just reading recently about the—and I can't remember the term for it—but the water—

HH: Aquamation, or alkaline hydrolysis. I'll come up with it. It's water cremation. A lot of people are doing it with pets now. It's only legal in a few states, and had you not asked me I probably would have been able to rattle it off. I don't know. Because people—the way—there's water that comes out when it's done, and people are concerned that that's organic body material that's coming out. And the real intricate study that I read on it was that where that is going has to be filtered into the public waste area, and that that's the reason it's not allowed, is that what is draining is coming out. But it produces the same results as cremation. It's just breaking down the body chemically as opposed to with flame. I've not heard much buzz around it here at all. I think anything in the funeral industry, from what I've heard, takes really slow. It's getting, you'll see press about it, splashed around, but I don't think you'll see it mainstream. And I think the units are pretty expensive too. So I doubt that you'll find a funeral home that offers both. Because they're both pretty expensive. But we'll see. Time will tell.

SB: I was curious reading about it, thinking not—I wasn't fully understanding why this is a, you know, what this offers that cremation doesn't.

HH: The flame. I guess. They call it flameless cremation. So. And it's a little less, pulls a little less energy than, I think, cremation does. Someone said it's like driving from here to Wisconsin in a Prius, is how much fuel—I mean, you still use up a lot of fuel. I mean, cremation is not—depending on who you ask—cremation providers will say,

"It's very green." And green burial outfits will say, "Well, no, it's not. You're still putting mercury into the air, and you're still using fuel to fuel the—" But it's less invasive on the earth than traditional burial. Depending on who you ask, you'll get different answers. But I don't know that it would ever be mainstreamed, for a while. Unless the cost comes down on it too. Because you know, funeral homes are businesses, and you have to be able to afford to buy one. So. I think it's a lot more relevant with pets right now. I don't know. We'll see. I'll be watching too. Really.

SB: Well, this has been fantastic. Is there anything you'd like to add before?

HH: I can't think of anything. I've kind of—gave you many of my thoughts, and think I've covered most of it. And I'm glad you're doing this, you know, for people to listen to and educate them on. If this reaches just one person, who will take some information about Death Café or have a better— (Laughs) That's kind of an inside joke. You see people on talk shows, "If I could help one person with my crazy thing that I do." Maybe somebody will hear this and look into green burial, or realize that funeral directors aren't all bad. Or out to make a buck. Pay the bills, that's what we want to do. And make a living, and be able to send my kids to karate class. You know? So they can beat me up. (Laughs) But no. And I think when people are choosing, I like the idea of working for a locally-owned funeral home. I think that's supportive.

SB: Thank you so much. This has been great.

HH: You're welcome. Thank you. Appreciate it.

[End of recording]